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Apophaticism Transformed

A Review of *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* by Susannah Ticciati (Leiden: Brill, 2013) xv + 259 pp.

Mike Higon

This is a remarkable book. Susannah Ticciati's aim, as explained in her opening sentence, is to develop 'a contemporary apophatic theology which is both extreme in its denial of what language can achieve in its attempts to speak about God, and yet robust in its affirmation of what language about God can nevertheless accomplish' (1) – and she pursues that aim with intelligence and lucidity. The book marks a real advance in contemporary debate about apophaticism.

Ticciati begins with an initial hypothesis, that God-language does not itself represent God, but contributes to the redemptive transformation of human beings who in that transformation do represent God. This hypothesis is then subjected to a long process of clarification and refinement amounting eventually to its complete transformation. By the end, employing a technical vocabulary that has been carefully husbanded over the course of seven chapters, she says instead that 'Both words and human beings (the former dependently on the latter) can be said to signify God insofar as the divine difference becomes manifest in the transformation of semiosis whereby human beings use and interpret signs (including themselves and others, but also words) in ways which restore genuine triadicity to them' (214).

Skipping to the end in this way is not, however, an appropriate way to understand Ticciati's claims. The book takes the form of a progression or ascent: an on-going refinement, driven by clarity, attentiveness, and tenacious questioning, in the direction of deeper truthfulness. Yet that form mirrors the ceaseless transformation towards

truthfulness that is the book's subject matter. The book practices what it preaches, and to understand its claims one must follow the itinerary that it lays out.

The subtitle of the book is 'Augustine and the Redemption of Signs'. In part, this is because Augustine's account of signs in *De doctrina* plays a central role in two chapters at the heart of the book. More substantially, however, it is because his account of predestination serves as the test case for much of the rest of the book.

Nevertheless, predestination is not itself the doctrinal heart of the book. That, rather, is provided by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The God who is the beginning and end of all things cannot be a thing, and even when we say that God exists as the cause of all things, we must immediately go on to say that God does not exist as other things exist, and is not a cause as other things are causes. Words applicable to things are inapplicable to the God who creates *ex nihilo* – not simply to a degree, but absolutely. God cannot be an object for our speech like other objects, competing for our attention with them, marked out from them by distinctions fit only to distinguish between creatures. God is not an object, and Ticciati therefore insists that God-language 'is not "about" God (as an object from which the speaking subject can stand back)' (3) – indeed, that 'there can be no "aboutness" with respect to God' (4). *Creatio ex nihilo* is the ground of apophaticism, and one can read this book as a search for ever more precise conceptual resources with which to articulate that doctrine's logic.

Augustine's theology of predestination matters only because it provides a screen on which to display the relation between divine and human agency that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* yields. Ticciati summarises Augustine's account in three rules.

(1) 'All is to be attributed not to the creature, but to God' (60).

(2) 'Human acts are both the result of divine agency and the expression of genuine human agency' (60).

(3) 'Do not divide up the activity between God and the human being' (63).

Together, these three rules define a relation that is *asymmetrical* (rule 1) but *non-competitive* (rules 2 and 3).

As Ticciati expounds it, much of Augustine's account of predestination – the dependence of the redemptive transformation of human action upon the prior action of God – simply elucidates these rules. There is, however, one problem. Alongside these three Augustine inserts a fourth: that God selects some as recipients of grace whilst leaving the rest in sin. This, Ticciati says, reinstates a competitive logic: it makes divine action an imposition upon the world of creaturely agency, marking out a division within it. This fourth rule therefore stands in contradiction to the first three rules.

The bulk of Ticciati's subsequent analysis of Augustine focuses on a crucial passage at end of *De dono perseverantiae*, in which Augustine gives advice to a group of monks on how to preach the theology of predestination that he has established in his polemical and doctrinal writing. As he questions the monks' ways of preaching predestination, Augustine clarifies the nature and limits not just of the language of preaching, but also the language of doctrine. Reading this passage within the apophatic frame that she has established therefore enables Ticciati to ask how language can properly be used within that frame.

Augustine sets out the monks' approach to preaching predestination, starting: 'some of you, having received the will to obey, have come from unbelief to faith, or having received perseverance, remain in faith, but the rest of you who dally in the delight of sins have not yet risen up...' (15.38). He then takes this second-person address, and turns it back into a third-person doctrinal summary: 'Some, having received the will to obey, are converted from unbelief to faith or persevere in faith, while the rest who dally in the enjoyment of sins ... have not yet risen up...' (22.58). Finally, he presents an alternative way of translating this doctrinal statement back into the second-person form of a sermon:

‘Having received the will to obey, you have come from unbelief to faith, and having received perseverance, you remain in faith... But if any of you still dally in the delight of damnable sins, embrace discipline...’ (22: 58–61).

Ticciati first explores this in performative terms, noting the change from a form of words aimed at *defining* to a form of words aimed at *preaching*, and drawing on Austin’s account of speech acts in order to articulate this difference as a difference in illocutionary acts. She then attends to the shift from third-person discourse to second-person discourse, drawing initially on Geoffrey Nunberg’s work on indexicals, before moving on to draw on distinctions made by C.S. Peirce. Her final account of the shift deploys a fully semiotic analysis.

Peirce distinguished between mere familiarity with a notion (the first grade of clearness), the ability to offer a precise abstract definition (second-grade clearness), and the ability to apply the definition in particular circumstances (third-grade clearness). The monks’ preached version of the doctrine of predestination invited the congregation to step back for an abstract overview of their identity in relation to God’s action, and so remained at the second grade; Augustine’s preached version, however, calls for third-grade clarity. In this version, the members of the congregation do not receive a fixed placing by the preacher within a pre-existing scheme of predestination, having their meaning exhausted by this placing. Rather they are invited into a process of ongoing definition, by way of particular encounters in which they learn to read (to take as signs) particular aspects of their own practice, in specific contexts, as forms of ‘dallying’ in sin, and by the same token to read themselves as called to corresponding forms of discipline, and thereby as already recipients of the grace that is the only light by which that recognition could have taken place. So, in particular pastoral encounters, the words proper to a doctrinal statement operating at the second grade of clearness can receive third-grade clarity – that is,

concretely particularising moments of definition or application, no one of which exhausts their meaning.

Crucially, these pastoral encounters form an ongoing drama in which the words of doctrine do have a place. In order to understand, however, the account of doctrinal language that this yields, we need to explore in more detail Ticciati's account of semiotics, which she draws from John Deely, and from Rowan Williams' analysis of Augustine's semiotics in *De doctrina christiana*.

Williams brings together two distinctions made by Augustine: that between sign and thing and that between use and enjoyment. Augustine uses the latter distinction to name the difference between God and the world: all creatures are to be used for the enjoyment of God; only God is to be enjoyed. Ticciati follows Williams in mapping the sign/thing distinction onto this, to enable her to say that all creatures (including both words and people) are things which are also signs (i.e., things that should be *used* as signs) of God; but that just as God alone may not be used, so God alone is not a sign. Yet, precisely because God is not a thing amongst things, using a thing for God's sake is not like using a thing for anything else's sake, and signifying God is not like signifying anything else. To use a creature for some creaturely end is to define it in terms of that end; it is to allow its significance for me to be exhausted by its relation to that end. To enjoy a creature is to define it in terms of my own desire; it is to allow its significance for me to be exhausted by its relation to me. Only use for the sake of God sets the creature free for a significance beyond these finite relationships. It sets it free from simple instrumentalisation; but it also sets it free from my enjoyment, for 'to posit God as the end of one's desire is precisely to relinquish one's desire as the defining context' (181). To see another creature in relation to God is not to place it in one more context over against

others, but to liberate it to signify again and again in multiple contexts, none of which, and no combination of which, can exhaust it.

The turn from enjoyment or finite use to use for God's sake is a transformation of the pattern of signification in which creatures are involved: it is a transformation of semiosis. To say that creatures are signs of God becomes, in this view, an invitation to participation in this transformed semiosis. It is a transformation in which the fixed significance that signs have for me is broken open by their relation to God, and 'genuine triadicty' restored. In a genuinely triadic semiosis, significance is found not in the existence of abstract categorisations, but in repeated particular encounters in each of which things gain a particular significance for us that does not exhaust them. To participate in such semiosis is a matter of redeemability (it unsticks us from patterns of signification in which we have become imprisoned), of provisionality (each new pattern can itself be broken open and transformed) and of humility (the interpreter can never supply a definitive pattern of signification).

This whole account – illustrated by Augustine's revision of the monks' preaching of predestination, underpinned by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and articulated by means of a revised Augustinian semiotic – is the basis on which Ticciati rests her conclusions about the nature of God-language, and specifically about the nature of doctrine, in an apophatic frame. Doctrinal language provides the general material of which particular transformations are made: it fuels, but does not exhaust, a transformed semiosis. Itself the distilled product of multiple particular moments of triadic signification, doctrine articulates the redemptive triadic logic of a transformed semiosis, but does so in signs that call for humble and provisional acts of particularising definition in specific contexts. It is therefore 'both the engine and product of the church's development over time – a deep sign, as it were, of the mind of the church as the locus of divinely redemptive transformation' (223).

Take, for instance, the claim that ‘God is good’. We cannot know what it means to say that God is good, nor even what it means to say that God is the cause of goodness. But, in Ticciati’s scheme, these words are certainly not empty. To say that ‘God is good’ tells us ‘where to look in order to find God’ (242): God becomes manifest in the on-going, never finalised becoming good of God’s creatures in always particular circumstances. To say that ‘God is good’ points to that on-going becoming *as* the manifestation of God – as, that is, the symptoms of a semiosis in which God is signified. The words ‘God is good’ do not make an idle commentary upon this process of transformation, but are an ingredient in it: by naming and directing the semiosis in which we are involved, this claim ‘does not point away from itself to God as something separate, but “renders” God present’ (228).

One might even say – though Ticciati herself does not – that a certain ‘aboutness’ is restored to doctrine here. Doctrine, she says, ‘does make present a genuine other from itself... God is distinct from the utterance itself’ (228). To say that doctrine is ‘about’ God might be a way of naming the manifestation that we see of the divine difference in creaturely semiosis *as* a gift. It names it as coming *from* God, and therefore as pointing *to* God. Even if we cannot know what we are saying about God when we say that God is good, we might nevertheless properly say that there is that about God which is manifest in this becoming good of God’s creatures. But since there is no way of saying *what* about God is manifest in this becoming other than by pointing to the becoming itself: the pointing involved cannot lead to our turning away from creaturely becoming in order to face towards God. Doctrine, therefore, says Ticciati, ‘transcends the difference between referential and non-referential, descriptive and non-descriptive language’ (228).

This book is an impressive achievement. The seriousness with which it takes its subject matter, and the indefatigable attentiveness that drives the argument further in and further

up, are exemplary. It is in keeping with that dynamic, however, that I want to suggest that Ticcianti's argument has not yet reached a resting point. There are, I think, two complementary gaps in her analysis that suggest that a further transformation is necessary.

The first lies between the austerity of Ticcianti's apophatic logic and the specific character that she gives divine action. One hint of this gap appears in her identification of the inconsistency in Augustine's theology of predestination. I do not think that the account of divine agency given up to this point in her argument is sufficient *by itself* to demonstrate this inconsistency. The God who creates *ex nihilo* creates a world marked by distinctions, dividing day and night, land and sea. This is both wholly a matter of God's agency and wholly the outworking of creaturely agencies dependent upon that divine agency. These distinctions are not imposed by God upon a world that would otherwise have gone its own way: divine and creaturely agencies are not in competition, and the creaturely agency involved is free. In order to make her case for the inconsistency of Augustine's account of predestination, therefore, Ticcianti needs to show that the distinction between election and rejection cannot work in the way that these distinctions do – that it cannot be a matter of God creating a world within which this distinction arises non-competitively, in and through the working of secondary agencies. My suspicion is that her argument rests at this point upon a specific characterisation of God's agency – its intrinsic orientation to redemption – that is not itself derivable simply from the austere logic of *ex nihilo*, and that has not directly appeared in her analysis up to this point.

Another indication of this gap appears later in her argument. Her description of the triadic semiosis governed by the apophatic *ex nihilo* logic is presented as if its character flows entirely from that logic, and as if that logic were sufficient to underwrite its character as redemptive, even as loving. To put it another way, her argument suggests that no more need be said at the second grade of clearness about the redemptive transformation of

human beings than that it is the restoration of genuine triadicity to semiosis. Yet I can see nothing in the *ex nihilo* logic of apophasis itself, as Ticciati has set it out, to rule out the possibility that a triadic semiosis could have the character of constant dissolution, of entropy, erosion, and terror. In setting out the redemptive character of triadic semiosis Ticciati has not simply unpacked the logical entailments of her *ex nihilo* logic; she has made specific, unremarked decisions about the shape and *telos* of that semiosis. Here too, we see that there is a specificity, a character or nature to her depiction of divine agency that is not accounted for in her presentation.

This, then, is the first gap in Ticciati's account. There is also a second, however, closely related to the first. Her argument is, as I stressed above, governed by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* – and by an austere version of that doctrine at that, stripped down to its deepest logic. For her purposes in this book it does not matter whether the world's creation *ex nihilo* is a truth of reason, or is 'bequeathed to us by the contingencies of religious tradition' (27–28), because the more specific colouring of the doctrine is not germane to her case. That *ex nihilo* logic then controls what can be said about the doctrine of predestination: it sets the bounds beyond which the doctrine of predestination cannot go. And yet the doctrine of predestination is properly a facet of the doctrine of election, and the doctrine of election is precisely the locus where Christian theology has often articulated the particularity or specificity of God's action. We may want to follow Ticciati in using Nicholas Lash's language, and saying that, although God makes 'all the difference', God makes no particular difference – and yet the doctrine of election challenges us nevertheless to find a way of speaking of the particular determination of God's action. It is the absence of a clear account of that particular determination that is the second gap in Ticciati's argument.

So, in her epilogue, Ticciati analyses the God-language of Psalm 96, and touches on the verse in which Israel are exhorted to 'Tell it among the heathen that the Lord is King'. Reading this within her apophatic logic, she is able to insist that Israel 'need not compete with the heathen over its God, but can join together with them in shared praise of God as the one who made them all' (245). We can certainly see there the beginning of an account of how the election of Israel is an election of the whole world in, with and through Israel, but it is not clear quite what space her apophatic logic might allow for the abiding significance of God's choice of Israel within that process, and so of the abidingly particular identification of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This second gap is more clearly visible, however, in Ticciati's handling of Christology. Christology turns up only in asides, as when Ticciati states that the logic of Chalcedon is fully compatible with her apophatic logic. The identification of the God of *creatio ex nihilo*, the God of triadic semiosis, as redeemer, as good, wise, and loving, appears in this presentation to be independent of the identification of God in Christ. Yet I suspect that it is not until she recasts her triadic semiosis as a semiosis gathered around Christ – a semiosis that cannot be adequately understood or characterised (even at the second grade of clearness) without attending to its animation by Jesus of Nazareth as the unsurpassably central creaturely sign of God, that the specificity of its character as loving and redemptive will actually be secured. To call the redemptive transformation of human beings in which God is manifested 'the restoration of genuine triadicity to semiosis' does not say all that needs to be said, even if one's purpose is simply to lay out the logic of a new apophaticism. The redemptive transformation of human beings in which God is manifested is their incorporation into Christ by the Spirit, on the way to the Father – and to recognise it as such will make a transformative difference to the account one might give of God-language, its limits, and what it can nevertheless accomplish.

This is a book that takes the reader on a demanding and rewarding journey, but that journey needs to continue. Ticciati's triadic semiosis needs another transformation – beyond the performative, indexical and semiotic reworkings to which she has already subjected it – and this further transformation is no less likely to change the terms of her account of apophasis. The redemption of signs needs to be rethought, not now simply as triadic, but as Trinitarian.